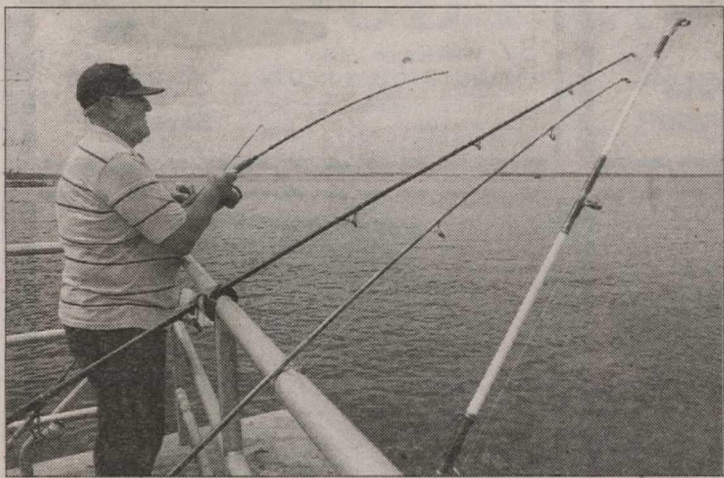


'THIS NEEDS TO BE CLEANED UP QUICKLY'



Adam Juzefyk of Clark tries to catch a bluefish at Old Bridge Waterfront Park. The beach area, however, has been closed.

Raritan Bay tests discover high levels of lead in sea life

EPA officials worried about waterfront's use

BY ALIYAH SHAHID
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Mussels, clams and bait fish caught near the Laurence Harbor sea wall in Raritan Bay have shown high levels of lead in recent tests, officials from the Environmental Protection Agency said during a presentation to the Old Bridge Environmental Commission.

The data from these latest tests are still being verified and exact numbers will be announced soon, J. Daniel Harkay, who is heading the EPA cleanup, told the panel Wednesday.

The test results come two months after the EPA reported very high levels of lead in three waterfront sites along Raritan Bay in Old Bridge and Sayreville. The EPA called for immediately closing the areas. The new tests are the first to examine the marine life.

"People are using these bait fish for catching other fish, and other fish consume these bait fish and will accumulate the toxins," said Robert Spiegel, executive director of the Edison Wetlands Association, a nonprofit environmental organization. "It's a huge red flag that this needs to be cleaned up quickly. It's a direct exposure for people that are fishing and swimming in these areas. It's not something to be taken lightly."

Several officials have blamed National Lead Industries, which for decades had a paint-manufacturing facility in Old Bridge, for the contamination. Because National Lead refused to help with the cleanup, the state Department of Environmental Protection turned the case over to the EPA in September.

In March, the EPA said tests at the western jetty near Cheesequake Creek revealed lead levels of 198,000 parts per million — nearly 500 times the residential limit of 400 parts per million. Average lead levels in the area were 52,399 parts per million. The jetty's size depends on the tide, but is about 755 feet long and 20 to 30 feet wide.

At the Laurence Harbor sea wall area, the range of lead found was as high as 142,000 parts per million. At the half-acre beach area in Sayreville, just north of the Cheesequake Creek jetty, lead was also 142,000 parts per million.

EPA officials said approximately 75 percent of 4,200 feet of fence has been erected around the contaminated areas. They hope to finish the fencing by next week.

However, the fence isn't keeping people out, said Spiegel, who spotted fishermen in the affected areas over Memorial Day weekend.

EPA officials said approximately 30 feet of fencing has been torn down.

"The plan is to replace it," said EPA on-scene coordinator Andrew Confortini, who added the fencing was torn down at night, but he doesn't think it was by fishermen. "We did it once already, and we'll keep doing it."

Ten signs — in English and Spanish — also warn that there are high levels of lead in the area and say sunbathing, swimming and fishing are prohibited.

EPA officials said the next step involves more testing. They plan to dig deeper and take samples farther from the shore.

The process will be lengthy, said Pat Seppi, a community involvement coordinator for the



A sign warning about water contamination doesn't deter people from fishing off the jetty Tuesday at the park.

EPA. She said sampling, a feasibility study, a public comment period and a design phase would have to be completed before cleanup could start.

"Our hope is that this will take priority in our region as far as getting funds to clean it up," she said. "There is a risk here, without a doubt. In my mind, that would certainly move us up the list."

Still, some members of the township environmental commission were discouraged.

"I think this will be a long,

drawn-out process," said commission member Mike Cerrato, who thinks the project could take 10 years.

Currently, the site is being considered for the Superfund National Priorities List. The site is in the public comment period, which will end Monday. A Superfund designation would not be made before the fall. The designation would enable the EPA to investigate those responsible for the contamination.

One resident, Samantha Manburg, said Wednesday's meeting reassured her that the EPA was

committed. Manburg, 36, has been living on the waterfront with her husband for eight years. Still, she said the situation is disturbing. She even got a blood test — which was normal — for lead.

"We're concerned," she said. "We bought the property in hope that our kids one day would be able to play on the beach. If our property values haven't dipped yet, they will."

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